Abstract

This article investigates the use of social media for visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Using a large set of visual data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte, the authors employ content analysis to examine how the conflict was represented and interpreted in proUkrainian and proRussian online communities during the peak of violence in summer 2014. The findings point to the existence of profound differences in framing the conflict among pro Ukrainian and proRussian online communities. The former tended to interpret the conflict as a limited military action against local insurgents, whereas the latter presented it as an allout war against the Russian population of Eastern Ukraine. The article suggests that framing the conflict through social media facilitated the propagation of mutually exclusive views on the conflict and led to the formation of divergent expectations in Ukraine and Russia concerning the outcome of the war in Donbas.

Keywords

conflict, Russia, social media, Ukraine, visual framing, Vkontakte, war

An unshaven man with a machine gun waves a toy monkey from the downed Malaysia Airlines plane in front of photographers. A column of armoured personnel carriers flying Ukrainian flags speeds through a dusty country road. An elderly woman cries near a ruined house somewhere on the outskirts of Donetsk. A group of armed insurgents with an Eastern Orthodox icon and a Russian imperial flag sit around a military truck. A small company of smiling Ukrainian soldiers with new automatic rifles stand in a sunflower field under the blue sky. These are just some among thousands of images that flooded Ukrainian and Russian social networking sites in summer 2014 and influenced how internet users from both countries perceived and interpreted the conflict between the Ukrainian army and proRussian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine.

In our article, we investigate the role of social media in visual framing of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, also known as the war in Donbas. Hoskins and OLoughlin (2010) argue that, in the current age of mediatized war, the media become an integral part of warfare, affecting the ways in which the conflict is perceived by the general public, what decisions are made by policymakers, and how the history of the conflict is written by historians. While a number of studies examine the use of media for framing recent con flicts, including the 2003 Iraq war (Griffin, 2004), the 2008 war in Georgia (Basilaia et al., 2013), and the ongoing war in Syria (Greenwood and Jenkins, 2015), the majority of existing analyses tend to focus on mainstream media, in particular news agencies. Consequently, many of the existing studies do not account for the increasing dissemina tion of digital technology and the growing popularity of social media, which according to Kuntsman (2010: 2) challenge the monopoly of news media by fundamentally trans forming modes of witnessing, feeling and remembering violent and traumatic events. The recognition of this transformation is particularly urgent in the case of postsocialist countries, such as Ukraine and Russia, where digital media form a pivotal discursive territory for framing past and present conflict alike, and influence how these conflicts are represented and interpreted by the general public.

In order to contribute to the conflict framing research in the postsocialist context, we examined the emergence of visual frames related to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in social media, using data from a popular social networking site, Vkontakte. In order to explore differences in framing the conflict among proUkrainian and proRussian online communities, we examined visual images published in two public Vkontakte groups Antiterrorist operation (Antiterroristicheskaja operacija) and Reports from the Novorossiyan Militia (Svodki ot opolchenija Novorossii) in the second half of summer 2014. Using content analysis, we tried to answer the following questions: How did the dynamics of frame production change in the course of the conflict? What differences in framing the conflict can be detected between proUkrainian and proRussian online com munities? How did internet users interact with different categories of visual content and which categories attracted the most attention? And, finally, what was the impact of the use of social media for visual framing of the events in Eastern Ukraine on the develop ment of the conflict?

Background to the conflict

The origins of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be traced back to a series of proRus sian rallies, which took place in March 2014 in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. These rallies were directed against the new proWestern Ukrainian government, which was installed after the overthrow of President Yanukovich in February 2014, following a

countrywide protest campaign known as the Euromaidan protests. The crisis of legiti macy of the postYanukovich government, together with the fear of disruption of cultural and economic relations with Russia, which were historically strong in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine, served as a starting point for the wave of antigovernment protests.1 While initially insignificant, these rallies intensified during the Crimean crisis, reaching their peak after the referendum that resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia on 18 March.

The starting point of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be related to 6 April, when groups of proRussian activists stormed government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and declared the formation of the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics (DNR and LNR, respectively). The next day, the Ukrainian government led by Oleksand Turchinov announced that antiterrorist measures (Turchinov objavil , 2014) would be taken against armed insurgents in Eastern Ukraine. Despite the measures, however, the pro Russian militant groups, which included both local citizens and Russian volunteers, con tinued to expand their control over the Donbas region by capturing administrative buildings and police stations in Kramatorsk, Horlivka and Mariupol. The city of Sloviansk, which was captured by the proRussian insurgents led by Igor Girkin2 on 12 April, became the centre of rebellion as well as a place of major confrontation between the proUkrainian and proRussian forces in the following weeks.

The conflict escalated in May 2014 after a referendum was held in DNR and LNR calling for two independent Peoples Republics, followed by the presidential elections in Ukraine, which were won by Petro Poroshenko. Following Poroshenkos promise to end the antiterrorist operation in a matter of hours (Macdonald and Behrakis, 2014), the Ukrainian army started advancing to the insurgentcontrolled territory at the end of May. A number of skirmishes took place both in and around Donetsk and Luhansk, resulting in dozens of deaths on both the government and insurgent sides. Despite active resistance from the Peoples Republics, which presumably received military support from Russia (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5), progovernment forces managed to recapture a number of cities in Eastern Ukraine, including Krasnyi Liman and Mariupol.

After a massive battle near Yampil on 19 June, where both sides used armoured vehi cles and tanks, the Ukrainian government declared a weeklong ceasefire in an attempt to implement Poroshenkos peace plan. The compromise, however, was not reached, and the fighting continued with a new government offensive that started on 1 July. Besides capturing a number of villages in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, on 5 July the Ukrainian army seized Sloviansk, which for three months remained a major insurgent stronghold. The armys offensive continued in the following days, resulting in the cap ture of Kramatorsk and Artemivsk and the retreat of insurgent troops under the command of Girkin to the Donetsk city.

The downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on 17 July brought a brief break to the fighting, as both the Ukrainian government and insurgents blamed each other for the destruction of the passenger plane. In a matter of days, however, the confrontation resumed as government forces continued to capture small towns across Donbas in order to surround and isolate insurgent forces; at the same time, the Ukrainian troops under took another attempt to secure a border between Ukraine and Russia. As the Ukrainian army moved to the suburbs of Donetks and Luhansk, both cities came under artillery fire,

resulting in a number of losses among the civilian population and significant damage to the local infrastructure. Similarly, the city of Horlivka, one of the major industrial hubs in the Donbas region, also came under heavy shelling, resulting in dozens of deaths and the flight of the civilian population.

Despite the quick advancement at the end of July, government forces were not able to secure the Ukrainian state border. Instead, at the beginning of August, a number of army units were surrounded in the south of Luhansk region and forced to either surrender or move to Russia; according to several reports, insurgent units were supported by the Russian artillery, which was shelling Ukrainian forces across the Ukrainian Russian border (Demirjian and Birnbaum, 2014). Similarly, attempts to surround Donetsk and isolate the territory of DNR failed after a series of meeting engagements around Shakhtarsk and Miusinsk at the end of July and the beginning of August.

Yet, the decisive breakthrough in the course of the conflict occurred in the second half of August when, during the battle of Ilovaisk, pro Russian insurgents started their coun teroffensive, which resulted in the encirclement of a significant number of Ukrainian troops, including several volunteer battalions. According to the Ukrainian side, the insur gent counteroffensive was supported by regular Russian army troops, including attack helicopters and tanks (MoDoU, 2015); some reports (Czuperski et al., 2015: 5) suggest that up to 4,000 Russian soldiers participated in the insurgent counteroffensive. The sub sequent advancement of insurgent forces resulted in the expansion of the territories of the Peoples Republics and the signing of the first Minsk agreements on 5 September, which were intended to ensure a ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and insurgents.3

Literature review

In recent decades, the concept of framing has become extensively used in social sciences and the humanities,4 and is often viewed as the most utilized mass communication theory of the present era (Bryant and Miron, 2004: 695). According to Entman (1993: 52), fram ing is a process of selection of some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evalua tion, and/or treatment recommendation. Frames themselves, as Reese (2001: 5) argues, can be understood as organizing principles that are both socially shared and persistent over time; by revealing those principles through symbolic forms of expressions, individu als and societies can meaningfully structure the social world around them. Much research on framing focuses on political communication i.e. how public actors use media to com municate certain views on events and issues; however, as DAngelo and Kuypers (2009: 1) note, framing research expands far beyond quintessentially political sites and topics and encompasses a variety of areas, including religion, sport and healthcare.

Because frames influence not only the ways in which information is presented, but also how it is comprehended, Scheufele (1999) points to the importance of differentiat ing between two types of frames: media or news frames (DAngelo, 2002) and individual frames. Media frames can be defined as central ideas or story lines that provide meaning to certain sequences of events (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989: 143). In contrast, indi vidual frames are clusters of ideas that guide processing of information on the individual level; according to Scheufele (1999: 107), these clusters can take the form of longterm

political views or shortterm issuerelated frames of reference. DAngelo (2002: 873) notes that in the process of frame building both types of frames interact with each other as the prior knowledge that individuals have is essential for the processing of informa tion conveyed in media frames; however, the differentiation between different types of frames is helpful for operationalization of the concept of framing in the context of spe cific case studies.

Because in our study we were particularly interested in the ways in which different aspects of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine emerged as more salient in social media, we decided to focus on conflictrelated media frames, which define both the information presented to the audience and the method of presentation (Iyengar, 1991). The role of media frames is important in any social context because their selection affects the way in which an audience perceives a particular issue. However, at a time of conflict, frames become particularly significant because they determine how the cause of strife is under stood and what is thought to be the appropriate response (Hammond, 2007: 18). Because of its potency, however, the use of frames can have a profound impact on the course of conflict: in some cases, as Bratic (2008) argues, it can contribute to the peaceful transfor mation of strife by promoting reconciliation and diminishing hostilities, whereas in others, as Hamelink (2008) points out, a particular selection of frames can motivate people to engage in more violence and impede deescalating behaviour.